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Nisqually River stabilizes, but more rain coming

High water cuts roads throughout county

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THE OLYMPIAN

At least 10 families at the Riverside Manor Apartments bordering the swollen Nisqually River have evacuated. Others have stayed.

□ Apartment managers Terry Chapman and Teresa Harris were keeping a watchful eye on the river.

A car poked out from 3 feet of water in the submerged parking lot. Sandbags stacked along the riverbank served as a line of defense between the rising water and residents in the 40-unit complex.

"I hope it won't come up over those sandbags," Harris said. "I just want the rain to stop."

Twenty-five straight days of rain have brought the river higher, with some flooding in the lower Nisqually area, including roads near the Durgin Road tunnel, Sixth Avenue and Frank's Landing. Weather forecasters say there appears to be no end in sight to the rain.

The river showed signs of receding Thursday, one day after the water rose to 101/2 feet and county emergency officials called for a voluntary evacuation of the lowlands. A reading in McKenna on Thursday afternoon showed the river at just less than 91/2 feet, and it was expected to stabilize at 91/2 feet overnight, said Julie Holcombe, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service.

Flood warnings are issued for the river at 12 feet, although minor flooding such as that near the apartments, can occur before then, Holcombe said.

Officials at the county's emergency headquarters credited the river's recession with several hours without rain Wednesday night and Thursday morning, and less water being spilled from the LaGrande Dam. Tacoma Power was releasing 11,500 cubic feet per second, down from 13,000 earlier this week, utility spokeswoman June Summerville said.

At Riverside Manor, Chapman stood at the edge of his property, where about 3,000 sandbags were piled 3 feet high in hopes of keeping the water at bay. Chapman and Harris have taken turns being on watch in two-hour shifts.

"We did it so some of us could get some sleep, though none of us have gotten much," Harris said.

Some tenants have left for drier ground, but others don't want to go, she said. Chapman said he can't blame them; he's also reluctant to leave.

"Until we're told to get out, like I say, this is our home," Chapman said. "I'll be the last one to leave."

In the parking lot, volunteers with the Washington Conservation Corps made more sandbags, each weighing about 40 pounds. Amber Harris, Chapman and Harris' 10-year-old daughter helped assemble the bags until their fingers turned red from the cold.

Dale Ranier, the team's supervisor, has seen the river rise before. "This ain't nothin' compared to 1996 when it was all flooded here," he said.

In February 1996, flooding damaged or destroyed 343 homes countywide, including a number of them along the Nisqually River. River flows that year soared to 45,000 cubic feet per second.

"I never had to leave except for in 1996," said resident Larry Attwood, who has lived in a house bordering the river since 1966. "I've taken a lot of people out of here by boat over the years."

Nearby on Sixth Avenue, neighbors Jessica Brown, Melina Harris and Nicole VanTien remember people mounting their roofs to stay dry in the 1996 flood. The road closest to the river was under water Thursday and the trio used a boat to monitor conditions, but the trio said it was mild compared to 1996.

Tim Hudson's home on Sixth Avenue has been surrounded by water for two or three days. There is about 2 feet of water in the house and family members were moving their belongings to higher, drier ground, said Gene Patrick, Hudson's brother.

Other homes nearby weren't flooded. Residents say they don't want to leave unless they have to. In 1996, looters swooped in to take what they could find when some residents left to escape the flooding, Melina Harris said. She doesn't want that repeated.

"If it doesn't reach the yards, we won't leave," VanTien said. "We'll have to watch it to see how close it gets to the house."

Stories from flood zones

Kyle Barton, 20, learned after going to work Thursday morning that the State Patrol had closed U. S. Highway 12, preventing him from returning to his home between Oakville and Rochester.

Barton, who works at B&W Electric in Chehalis, said he and his father drove through 4 feet of floodwater in their Jeep Wrangler and are confident they could make it back. But a trooper told Barton over the phone that if he attempted it and got caught, he could receive a \$500 citation.

"We're trying to figure out something. We're not the kind of people who can afford to wait it out in a hotel," he said. His mother, two sisters, and one sister's baby were stuck in the house, he said. He'd hoped to find a friend to stay with. It wasn't clear Thursday night whether he was able to return home.

Barton did call the State Patrol, his legislators and the governor, hoping someone would have enough sympathy and allow him to go home.

A legislative aide with state Sen. Karen Fraser's office recommended he rent a helicopter, he said.

"That made me really mad," he said. "I just got done telling her I didn't have enough money to stay in a hotel until this goes away."

The Red Cross Emergency Shelter, which had opened Wednesday night, closed at 9:30 a.m. Thursday after the Nisqually River stabilized after several hours without rainfall, said John Tennis, spokesman for Thurston County Emergency Services.

Officials had called for a voluntary evacuation Wednesday when the river continued to rise. A family of five stayed overnight in the shelter at a Lacey church. "We think more self-evacuated from Frank's Landing and probably went to stay with family and friends," Tennis said.

Officials will keep an eye on river levels and work with the Red Cross to reopen the shelter, if necessary. A flood watch remains in effect for the Nisqually, Chehalis and Skookumchuck rivers through late tonight, according to the National Weather Service.
